

Zolotaia Zhila: Ocherki o folklore i duhovnoi kulture Kazakhstana [Golden vein: essays on the folklore and spiritual culture of Kazakhstan], by Seit Kaskabasov, Moscow, Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 2010, 668 pp., ISBN 978-5-280-03502-7 (in Russian)

The book *Zolotaia Zhila* is a collection of essays and research articles on the folklore and nomadic culture of Kazakhstan in comparative perspective. It represents the growing number of studies conducted since Kazakhstan's independence in 1991 that aim to rediscover the Kazakh oral epic and folkloric traditions, as well as to reconceptualize the cultural history of the Kazakhs. These studies have become especially important as some representatives of the Kazakh intelligentsia are seeking to rethink the concept of Kazakh national identity in non-Western frameworks.

Seit Kaskabasov plays an important role in these intellectual discourses on contemporary Kazakh culture as well as on the place of Kazakh oral traditions in the folklore traditions of the Turkic nations of Eurasia. As Director of the Mukhtar Auezov Institute of Literature and Art, he is one of the most respected Turkologists in Kazakhstan and Central Asia. He states that his publication is designed to present to both the general public and an expert audience 'many centuries of folklore and oral creative poetry', which became a part of 'contemporary multi-genre literary culture' (p. 5).

The publication is divided into three sections. The first section covers ancient folklore traditions from archaic myths to popular ancient tales and legends. The author carefully assesses the links between ancient Turkic myths and cosmology and Kazakh folklore. In doing this he tries to avoid the trap of building a mythology of national state identity, a tendency that can be seen in the writing of many scholars in the region. So many scholars and intellectuals in Central Asia have laid outright national claims on ancient myths, legends and tales, trying to prove the ancient roots of the Kazakhs (or Kyrgyzs, Turkmens, and so on). Kaskabasov constructs a more nuanced approach suggesting that 'ancient archaic myths' (p. 57) and folklore elements have been common among all Turkic tribes since the time of the early Turkic Khanate (sixth to seventh century AD), and that these elements can be traced through the archaic and syncretic elements of contemporary Kazakh folklore.

The second section deals with medieval-era folklore, especially the changes and 'dialogues' of various folklore and cultural traditions in the territory of contemporary Kazakhstan, the Middle East and southern Russia (p. 413). This section covers the cultural history, intensive cultural interactions with 'Muslim literary traditions' (p. 421) and the evolution of Kazakh folklore between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. The author argues that the culture of the people on the territory of Desht-i-Kypchak (which includes the territory of modern Kazakhstan) evolved mostly in the form of oral poetic traditions, in sharp contrast to the settled peoples of Central Asia, where written forms (handwritten books and various forms of written works) began to play a greater role during this period. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries heroic and heroic epics flourished among the nomadic people of the steppe, carefully developed and preserved by singers and bards (*zhyrchy*) travelling with military units. At the same time, some individual poets (*akyns*) began creating their very own *kuis* – legends, songs and poems, on various themes including love, the meaning of life and heroic panegyrics – as well as songs about native lands left behind. These songs were often accompanied by musical instruments. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries the epic and folklore traditions were entrenched; some of them were even written down under orders from *sultans*, *khans* and *biis*. During this era the Kazakhs also developed *dastans* – epics created in verse or prose – on various everyday-life themes, although these *dastans* increasingly came under influences from settled areas of Central Asia (p. 427). Some of these *dastans* included strong religious